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ABSTRACT

The leitmotif of this address, inspired by lines found in William B. Yeats' "The Second Coming", underscores the need for a greater display of solidarity of language teachers through increased participation in professional associations. The work of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is discussed and noted to be vital to the survival of language instruction at all levels of education. Commentary is made on changing social conditions and their educational implications. (RL)

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ARKANSAS FOREIGN LANGUAGE NEWSLETTER

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STRENGTHENING FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

(An address made by Dr. Lowell Dunham, president of ACTFL, to the Arkansas Foreign Language Teachers' Association, April 17, 1971.)

When one is asked these days to make a talk or give an address, he immediately places himself in a position of authority; and if there is anything that incites the general madness that infects us all, it is authority. Hence, the speaker never knows whether he will be attacked, bombed, shot, shouted down, or picketed. I feel relatively secure here today as I return to renew friendships I made several years ago on two different occasions and to spend some time with you discussing the language situation: Where we came from, where we are, and if possible to say something about where we are going and what our role is to be if we are to survive, and I am convinced we shall survive.

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I shall start by reading a selection from literature, a subject that is very often under attack not only by the new social scientists but also by certain groups within the language profession, as absurd as that may seem. This selection was written by the great Irish poet William B. Yeats some time shortly after World War I. I should like for you to keep this in mind, for we are told that literature has no relevance. I think you will see that it was relevant fifty years ago or more before the contemporary pedagogues or the young rebels of our campuses discovered and popularized the word.

It is the first stanza of the poem entitled The Second Coming.

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the center cannot hold
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

How was it possible for a man like Yeats, more than fifty years ago, to describe more accurately than a scientist the muddle in which all of us live today? There is no center, no centripetal force to hold us together; things do fall apart and there is anarchy everywhere in our contemporary world. How many of us everyday are talking and listening to students who, without a center, without values, without the customary guideposts are baffled and in many cases unhinged? It is an unsettling experience, as every teacher here can testify. As one high school teacher recently commented somewhat factiously, "Clinic five days a week and basketball of Friday nights."

"The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity", says the poet. I shall return to the phrase "the best lack all conviction" a little later and point out how it signals one of the most dangerous traits we find today among some of our language teachers.

The loss of a center of any central body of beliefs which guide us in our conduct affects us in every activity in which we are engaged. It is, of course, the cause of the feverish search for change, not change in the inevitable, marked and measured pace which we must all accept, but change for the sake of change. A recent book by a Britisher entitled The Neophiliacs maintains that this madness for change or love of change is the primary characterisc of our current society. It causes us to look at things without perspective; it causes us to be too immersed in the present, too circumscribed by our times and hence too prone to look for the absolute or the simplistic solution, something to quiet our anguish, or augustia, our angst, at any cost. I shall return to this point also as I discuss our attitude towards methods.

Some of the remarks I shall make concerning foreign languages are based on the experience I have earned (and I emphasize the word earned) as a student and teacher of foreign languages for the past forty years, as a teacher in the elementary and secondary schools, as a college teacher, as the assistant director of a college laboratory school, as a university teacher and department chairman, and a practicing linguist employed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as one of its agents and its administrators.

I saw Latin almost disappear from my small high school even before I graduated from the eighth grade. I saw a two year high school sequence of Spanish move in to compete with Latin. I saw the direct method tried. I saw the almost complete disappearance of foreign languages from the curriculum in secondary schools, colleges, and universities. I saw the beginning of a renewed interest in foreign language study after World War II. I lived through the so-called grammar-translation period and even survived the aural-oral method and am now in the new electicism.

I'm not trying to impress you with my credentials. That is one of the advantages age brings. You no longer have to impress people or please them. I'm not going to tell you how to teach. I don't know the answer to that question. I have been looking for it for forty years. Now and then I find a hint, but never the complete answer. The continued search may in itself be the only answer. I am trying to say that I have lived through several complete cycles of language teaching and that there is little or nothing new, just a slight refining here and a shift of emphasis there. I am trying to ask language teachers to beware of the absolute. It will always back you into a corner from which you cannot escape. I was impressed by

Professor Robert F. Roeming's skillful handling of the touchy session at ACTFL in New Orleans in 1969 when he chaired the meeting on the Pennsylvania Report. At one break in the program he made a comment I shall never forget. He said something like this: "Too many of our teachers are looking for the absolute. Once they find it they can go home, close their books and never have to open them again." I was trying to say much the same several years ago here in Little Rock when I gave a talk I entitled "Meat Balls for Lunch Today, or La Plume de ma Tante." One young man (I wonder if he is here today) was visibly upset that I should question the methodology being taught by the NDEA institutes, one of which he had attended. Like my students in the novel and short story classes, he failed to catch the implications of the title. I was aware of what NDEA was trying to do. I was grateful they were trying to tell us that there were four skills in language learning, not two; but I was alarmed that too many of the NDEA teachers were pushing a closed system, for I regard all closed systems as dangerous.

But with the organization of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and the initiation of its official publication Foreign Language Annals, foreign language teachers now have a professional periodical where our differences may be aired, where new methods may be proposed, examined, carefully analyzed, and accepted or rejected. Professional language teachers and professional researchers now have a forum in which they can speak without the pressure of the Federal Government programs and the dollars that accompany them. We can be more objective. Those of you who are members of ACTFL and who read the journals may complain that in some cases the articles are too rarified, too technical to benefit and reach the classroom teacher. This is a half truth. Annals like any academic publication whether it is literary or a methodology journal does tend to become too specialized. Foreign Language Annals are victims of the academic turn of mind, in the same way literary journals such as PMLA are. Methodology and literary criticism seem to both spin off of the main body to which each is attached and which they should both serve. One should serve the everyday classroom routine of language teaching and the problem of presenting things in a better way to our classes; the second should clarify and elaborate the literary text for better appreciation and understanding. The result is often a new area, such as methodology or literary criticism, that becomes an independent academic activity that has little or nothing to do with either the classroom or with the literary text. Both the methodologist and the literary critic is often found drowning in the professional garbage of his own words. But good research no matter how specialized is never lost. There articles can be used to our benefit in the methodology classes and given to our language teachers in training. They can be taught, simplified and made practical where they seem to be too much in the clouds. My colleagues in the literary field may criticize the organization and its publication with a sneer that is just another professional pedagogical organization with a pedagogical journal, and I agree. Since when is it a lowering of academic standards to find new and better ways of teaching language skills, literary works or any other body of knowledge?

ACTFL is the culmination of a long struggle to give professional strength and direction to a profession that too often had little or no leadership, that had to depend upon an English teacher to start the MLA foreign language program. Upon the success of ACTFL depends the future of foreign language teaching in the country. We must go it alone. We cannot use the MLA, or the Federal Government as a crutch; it is "shape up" or quit. English has long had its National Council of Teachers of English, one of the most active and professionally respectable organizations in education. What will you and I do with ACTFL? It is crucial for us to become independent professionally here and now.

Perhaps we should review the founding of ACTFL and what was behind its beginning and how it related to one of our central problems in the teaching of foreign languages.

In 1950 MLA with a Rockefeller grant began its first language programs. Problems in foreign language education were then relatively simple. They were basically to get more languages into the schools and get more students taking languages. But with the advent of NDEA, in the sixties the situation changed over night. More than 40,000 teachers received NDEA institute training. There was consequently great activity, and from the simple problems of the 30's, 40's, and 50's of increasing enrollment in languages and teaching more languages, problems were multiplied a hundred-fold. MLA was not set up constitutionally to cope with them. A need was felt for a professional organization that would embrace all languages, an organization such as the English profession had long had in the National Council of Teachers of English. So to meet these needs, the executive council of MLA in 1966 authorized the formation of ACTFL. Its first meeting was held in Chicago in 1967, and it began the publication of its official journal Foreign Language Annals. At present the organization has a membership of 9300 individuals with a total of 10,300, counting library subscriptions. MLA has contributed rather heavily financially and with the advice and council of the best and most experienced language men available to put ACTFL on its feet, its financial support will continue until 1975 when it will be phased out.

Then you will have to look yourself in the eye in the mirror and say, "What am I going to do about it?" You must realize that the job will be yours, not the Federal Government's nor MLA's.

I have these suggestions for you: Believe in what you teach or leave the classroom immediately. You cannot deceive your students. Remember the line of Yeats' poem: "The best lack all conviction." Many of us don't believe in what we teach. We shun workshops, we shun our professional organizations, we don't cooperate with our state coordinators.

The strongest protection you can have against the attacks being made now against languages is in the state organization. If it fails, the AAT's fail, ACTFL fails, and MLA fails. Our state coordinators will fail. The program will go down the drain.

College and university teachers must accept the responsibility of providing leadership for the classroom teacher, or you will be turned from your ivory tower possessing a Ph.D. that will measure little of nothing. We cannot survive on isolated levels. The problem of the university teacher is the problem of the FLES teacher, or the secondary teacher. It all has to do with language teaching!

I know there is some cause for worry today in our field. I know we are being attacked by the young barbarians as irrelevent. I know that FLES is in bad shape. Part of the mess, however, was of our own making, jumping on a band wagon with few professionally trained teachers to carry out the program. I know that one of the many surveys made claims that foreign language majors don't perform at the level they should. I also know geography surveys show a large percentage of our students don't know where Timbuctoo is and that a history survey shows that a large percentage of our students don't know who discovered America, and now another survey says one out of eight American can't read well enough to qualify for a driver's license. I also know that the corn blight is also about to get us. Pollution has already buried us; the atom bomb is just ready to go off to solve all our problems; cars aren't safe and the final blow has just fallen upon us this past summer: Wheaties don't build better

bodies seven different ways as television told us they would, or maybe I have confused Wheaties with Wonder Bread. Anyway, Wheaties are no longer the breakfast of champions! The here and the now is an age of doom and destruction, going from one real or imagined imminent disaster to another until, like sex and obscenity on the stage, nothing shocks. Out of this situation there can only arise a new era of hope and optimism. There is no other way to go.

I am thoroughly convinced, however, that in spite of our so-called failures in the classroom, more students are studying foreign languages today than ever before, that they are better prepared and better motivated than ever before, that our teachers are better prepared. I personally today would not accept my own master's thesis as a term paper in a literature seminar. I am appalled at its poor structure, poor handling, and poor writing. Both teachers and students by the hundreds and thousands today go to the country of the language they have studied or taught and reside and study there. We are moving slowly but surely to a more professional attitude with the organization of ACTFL, the publication of Annals and we can point with pride to the Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education as a volume which gives us a review of the happenings in foreign language teaching throughout the United States for the year. Most of our states now have a state supervisor or coordinator of foreign language working out of the state superintendent's office. Unless you have been or are a foreign language teacher isolated from universities or college or large urban centers, far out in the sticks, you have no conception of what it means to have these professionally trained and experienced men and women coming into your school, bringing you the best of the new materials, encouraging your isolated efforts, organizing workshops, and pulling the foreign language teaching profession together into a coherent whole. I know that we have some ten years of research now available to us. We have a wealth of classroom materials at hand we never dreamed of before. In addition to these achievements, we have the writers, the great scholars, the great teachers, the great methodologists themselves coming to our classrooms and lecturing and teaching and holding individual conferences with students. Even in the hinterlands of Oklahoma, our students are personally acquainted with Jorge Luis Borges, Rómulo Gallegos, Ives Bonnefoy, Julián Marías, Michel Butor, Jorge Guillén, Pedro Salinas, Octavio Paz, Ana María Matute, Guiseppe Ungaretti, and a host of others whom I shan't mention. If I had had the opportunity to learn and study under one of these visitors doing my undergraduate or graduate work, I should have thought I had seen God! The age of affluence has glutted us with so many opportunities and possibilities that we become blind to what we do have. I should like for methodologists to stop belittling the teaching of literature and teachers of literature to stop sneering at methodologists. Are we to eliminate the study of one of the great activities of man? Is Cervantes, Molière, Goethe, Dostoevski, Dante, Virgil, or Euripedes not good enough for us? Are we never to look for better ways of doing things? Are you or aren't you a foreign language teacher? Is one of the activities more important than the other? I can't see how the profession can exist one without the other. I should like to see the entire profession work together. Too often university and college teachers graduate their students and wash their hands of them. A kind of snobbery exists among many of our university and college foreign language colleagues. They refuse to take part in workshops, to give time to foreign language professional organizations in the state. This is professional suicide.

I should like for you as teachers of Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, German, Russian, and Chinese to consider yourselves as authorities in the field. The widespread threat against authority in the classroom, in the street, is only the obverse side of the coin.

Forces of disintegration are attacking all authority -- the church, the school,

the police, the administrator, the army, the navy, MLA -- and I am not intimidating that they are all lily white. But taken together, it is a concentrated effort to destroy the basis of western civilization with its rationalistic and humanistic concepts. "Madness is in the air," as a professor of the University of Buffalo recently remarked where a new college was created called "Conflict and Change." Seven hundred enrolled. They do whatever they deem important, including travel, studying major social problems or examining the relevance of the college curriculum; . . . students grade themselves and receive academic credit toward their degrees from the university. This only makes our job of holding the line that much more difficult. For as the poet remarked: "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

We must hold organizations together at all costs; they are our strength. We must be aware of quarreling and bickering among the various organizations or we shall end by shouting and cursing each other like fishmongers. ACTFL is the one organization on the national level designed by language people for language people and their profession. Students are looking for authority. Don't abrogate yours. If you defect, we are lost.

I should like to quote Barbara Tuchman, a distinguished British educator, to make my final point:

> "Of all the ills that our poor criticized, analyzed sociologized society is heir to, the focal one, it seems to me, from which so much of our uneasiness and confusion derive, is the absence of standards. We are too unsure of ourselves to assert them, to stick by them, if necessary in the case of persons who occupy positions of authority, to impose them. We seem to be afflicted by a widespread and eroding reluctance to take any stand on any values, moral, behavioral, or esthetic. Everyone is afraid to call anything wrong, or vulgar, or fraudulent, or just bad taste or bad manners. . . .
> . . . .If the educated man is not willing to express standards, if he cannot show that he has them and applies them, what, then is education for?. . . If at maturity he is not willing to express judgement on matters of policy or taste or morals, if at 50 he does not believe that he has acquired more wisdom and informed experience than is possessed by the student at 20, then he is saying in effect that education has been a failure."

We can only attain this assurance by being academically strong and professionally sound. Memberships in and support of ACTFL can give us this authority. Andre Paquette's preface to Volume I of the Britannica Review clearly states the need of our profession:

> Information is essential to decision making, but intelligent decisions can be made only if information has been properly accumulated, catalogued, and interpreted. Foreign language learning and teaching will improve to the extent that those interested in its advancement can communicate information effectively so that learners, parents,

school boards, teachers, and researchers can make well-informed decisions.

Please don't muff the chance this time. We have been welfare children of the Federal Government and MLA long enough. We have no more William Riley Parkers. The public is no longer enthusiastic with us; large segments of the academic community will no longer support us in faculty decisions; the press no longer looks on language programs as news. School administrators are lagging in interest as the federal millions for language instruction are being cut off, se acabó el baile de los millones, and they are looking for the newest fads and gadgets available, ready to jump off our cart and join a new one; the debacle in Viet Nam will, if it has not already done so, rouse the sleeping monster of isolationism to haunt us and urge us to turn in upon ourselves. Interest in foreign peoples and their cultures will trigger bitter memories, and humanistic aims of learning to live and appreciate foreign peoples and their culture will be forgotten.

It all depends on you. You will either make or break the language program and you will be able to weather the present crisis only if you are strong. Languages like other academic areas are victims of our age. To survive, we must -- you have no other choice -- build a strong state organization, support every activity of your state organization, support your state coordinator, support your national organizations, and above all ACTFL, for without professional strength and professional pride, no professional group survives. These things will give us a center and will help us to prevent things from falling apart. Without them as the poet warns, there is anarchy.